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Tracking Agca

Was Moscow involved?

It was on May 13, 1981, that a hand rose from a sea of smiling faces in St. Peter's Square and fired several shots at Pope John Paul II. After a quick trial by Italian authorities, Mehmet Ali Agca, 23, a self-described "international terrorist," disappeared behind bars to serve a life sentence, leaving a stream of questions unanswered: Who was he? Why had he done it? Had he acted alone or on someone else's orders? In an hourlong special report that will be broadcast this week, an NBC *News* team headed by Correspondent Marvin Kalb follows the trail of suspicion and surmise all the way to the Kremlin. Kalb says he has uncovered "a great deal of evidence, some of it, to be sure, circumstantial, linking the attempted murder in St. Peter's Square to the political and diplomatic needs of Red Square."

The report traces Agca's terrorist roots back to his native Turkey, where he had rubbed shoulders with extremists of both right and left. In July 1979 Agca pleaded guilty to the murder of moderate Turkish Journalist Abdi Ipekci; he escaped from prison five months later. In July 1980 Agca appeared in Sofia, Bulgaria. According to NBC, he spent seven weeks in the best hotels there, received a counterfeit Turkish passport and mingled with members of the Turkish Mafia, which has long run a thriving drugs-for-guns trade with the cooperation of Bulgaria's hard-line Communist regime. It was in Bulgaria, Kalb speculates, that the Soviets may have indirectly recruited the young killer. Kalb reasons that Agca could not have operated freely in Sofia without the complicity of the Bulgarian secret service—and, by extension, the Soviet KGB, which controls it.

Had it stopped there, Kalb's case would not have added much to what other investigators, notably Journalist Claire Sterling, have already revealed. Where NBC does break new ground is in attributing a precise motive to Moscow. Citing unnamed Vatican sources, Kalb reports that the Pope sent a special envoy to the Kremlin in August 1980, while Poland was in the grip of a nationwide strike. The envoy allegedly gave Soviet Leader Leonid Brezhnev a handwritten letter from the Pope, who threatened to "lay down the crown of St. Peter" and return home to join the resistance if the Soviets moved against Poland. After a series of diplomatic shuttles between Moscow, Warsaw and Rome, says NBC, the papal envoy persuaded the Soviets to acquiesce in the Gdansk agreement that gave birth to Solidarity. Exasperated by the Pope's intervention and by his subsequent "plans to send millions of dollars to Solidarity," says Kalb, Brezhnev may have decided to get rid of "this meddlesome priest."

Intriguing though it is, NBC's scenario falls far short of hard proof. A Vatican spokesman denied knowledge of any papal letter to Brezhnev or secret diplomatic mission to Moscow. Although U.S. Senator Alfonse D'Amato last week accused CIA officials of dismissing information he gave them in October 1981 that the Kremlin was involved in the plot to kill the Pope, U.S. intelligence officials told TIME they had no evidence that the Pope was involved in either Solidarity's birth or funding.

Many observers familiar with the Polish events of 1980 doubt that the Pope would have engaged in shuttle diplomacy on Solidarity's behalf just when the head of the Polish church, the late Stefan Cardinal Wyszynski, was publicly calling on workers to scale down their demands. And even if such intercession did take place in August 1980, why should the Soviets try to kill the Pope nine months later, when Solidarity was already well established? Finally, if the Soviets were so concerned about papal intervention, why didn't that prevent them from ordering a Polish-executed crackdown last December? In attempting to answer the big question behind the attack on John Paul, NBC has raised dozens more. ■